CHAPTER 10

The Incarnated Gamer: The Theophoric Quality of Games, Gaming, and Gamers

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In the game *Godus* (2013), the player is asked to assume the role of an almighty creator. The player begins his divine career by saving a primordial man and woman from drowning. With your help, they will travel to some sort of "promised land," where they will build a tent, and procreate. By forming the earth and waters, the player can shape the form of the game world and support (or hinder) the advancement of "his" chosen people.

In the game *Child of Light* (2014), the player assumes the role of a young princess, Aurora. The princess dies at Good Friday and is sent to the underworld to redeem its inhabitants, only to be resurrected the following Easter Sunday. Eventually, she saves her people from certain death-by-drowning (as in *Godus*), by leading them through a magical mirror to a now everlasting peaceful underworld.

In *Metro Last Light* (2013), the player assumes the role of Artyom, a Russian survivor of a nuclear holocaust in the near future. The game suggests a god-less universe, in which the God of creation has left humankind. When confronted with his incapacitated archenemy, the player can choose to save him. If and when he does, a little Russian Orthodox icon of Jesus Christ is revealed. Similarly, in the *Mass Effect* trilogy, the player can live up to the name of his avatar, space captain "Shepard" by freely sacrificing his or her own life in order to restore the otherwise damned universe.

In these kinds of modern video games, the gamer has to perform certain actions and/or make certain moral choices which, in a Christian view, could be interpreted as mirroring those of God himself: Creating (*Godus*), dying, descending, and being resurrected (*Child of Light*), presenting God in the world by forgiving your worst enemy (*Metro Last Light*), and sacrificing your own life for the redemption of humankind (*Mass Effect*). Some could argue that these game narratives indeed mirror the great Christian

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narrative of creation, redemption, and consummation, but only insofar as they are themselves part of the greater narratological metanarratives of our Western civilization.

But theologically, this is not the whole picture. As Rachel Wagner has argued in her landmark publication *Godwired* (2011), religion and (digital) play have certain strong similarities. While somewhat reductionist in her thoughts on the phenomenon "religion," Wagner indicates that the player, while playing these games, does more than just witness what the game has to offer him. It is in his personal involvement into the game narrative, that "activates" the game (Ryan, 2006). But what if these actions and/or choices that activate the game are wholeheartedly religious, mirroring the Christian metanarrative of creation, redemption, and consummation? What does that make the player, theologically seen? God? A godhead? Or something else?

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I will argue that video games do not only take inspiration from the Christian tradition (and/or make references or comments to this tradition), but also invite the player, through his avatar, to take part in a digital recreation or re-enactment of the divine acts of creation, redemption, and consummation. By playing these kinds of video games, the player is the bearer of the image of God himself, as seen in the Christian tradition. I call this the "theophoric quality" of video games.

To make this bold statement viable in any sense at all, I will take the following steps. First of all, I will differentiate between the different levels on which religion can be encountered in video games. Secondly, I will postulate a "theology of culture," in which the universe could be seen as offering a testimony of its creator, savior, and consummator, but only when the existence of this God is accepted a priori. Thirdly, I will offer an in-depth discussion on the theological concept of "christophorism/theophorism." Fourthly, I will make detailed theological analysis of the four earlier-mentioned video games in which, as I will argue, this theophoric quality can be found.

In this chapter, I will regard video games as "playable texts" (Bosman, 2016a). Games can be regarded as such because the idea of "playable texts" summarizes the two "structural qualities" of computer games. Videogames are "texts" because they are mediated sign systems, and are given meaning by their audience. This audience is not limited to the actual gamers and those who watch the gamers play their games, but it also includes the larger

culture itself, of which the players and the watchers are part. Video games are not just "texts," but *playable* texts. Video games incorporate elements of contest; they can be won or lost. The "pleasure" of gaming is derived from the uncertainty of the outcome of the game.

Treating the video games as playable texts and using a gamer-immanent approach (Bosman, 2016a), I will use close reading of the primary sources of my research, the actual video games themselves, as well as secondary sources (i.e., material provided by critics and scholars discussing the same game). Close reading of the video game series is performed by playing the games themselves (multiple times), including all possible (side) missions/quests.[1]

Before turning our attention to four theophoric case studies, one more word about identification. When playing a game, is everything that "happens" in the game, happening to the gamer or to his avatar? Succeeding, dying, choosing, fighting, running, and the like, are those thought of as belonging primarily to the avatar the gamer is controlling or to the gamer himself? Quantitative and qualitative studies on the relationship between gamers and their avatars suggest a very deep identification between the two, combined with a deep immersion in the game world and narrative (O'Neill, 2016; Waggoner, 2009).

In this chapter, I will focus on the Christian tradition and theology, disregarding all other religions and religious traditions in the world (with one partial exception for Judaism). This is a choice. The same argument, about the theophoric quality of video games, could have been made about other religious traditions like Shamanism, Islam, or Zoroastrianism.[2] This would, however, broaden the scope of this chapter beyond practical limitation, and would ask a significant amount of specific theological knowledge of multiple world religions. Technically, the term "theophoric" is inclusive, referring to all religions, while "christophoric" is exclusive, only to Christianity. In this chapter, I will use both terms more or less as equivalents.

FIVE LEVELS OF RELIGION IN VIDEO GAMES

The academic study of video games is a relatively young field of inquiry. This is of course related to the adolescent state of the subject matter itself. Video gaming has progressed rapidly since the release of *Pong* in 1972,

[1] For this article I used the PC version of the games.

[2] In *Prince of Persia* (2008), for example, the player is placed within a Zoroastrian framework, and tasked to perform specific actions related to its redemptive mythology.

growing into a vast billion dollar industry. When targeting the combination between digital games on the one hand and the phenomenon of religion on the other hand, the number of academic publications is rather limited.

Key publications in this field include *Halos & Avatars* (Detweiler, 2010), the aforementioned *Godwired* (Wagner, 2011), *eGods* (Bainbridge, 2013), *Of Games and God* (Schut, 2013), and *Playing with Religion* (Campbell, 2014). The University of Heidelberg's scholarly journal *Online* has published three specials dedicated to this interaction: *Religion in Digital Games* (Heidbrink & Knoll, 2014), *Religion in Digital Games Reloaded* (Heidbrink, Knoll, & Wysocki, 2015), and *Religion in Digital Games Respawned* (Heidbrink & Knoll, 2016).

Based on these (and other) publications and my own extensive experience as a "hardcore player" (Gackenbach & Snyder, 2012), I want to differentiate between five levels on which religion can be found in video games and/or on which the phenomenon of religion is actually studied in an academic context (Bosman, 2016a). These games range from explicit to implicit, from game-immanent to game-transcendent, and from developer-intended to gamer-intended. Religion can be found at the following levels (instances may pertain to more than one level) in video games: the material, referential, reflexive, ritual, and metalevel. The transition between the various levels is often fluid and diffuse.

Material religion is the explicit occurrence of (existing or fantasy) religion within the game itself. The average player will identify these elements as religious, whether or not they consider themselves to be religious. Think of the priests, clerics, shrines, churches, and chapels from the fantasy lore (for *World of Warcraft*, 2004 or *Diablo III*, 2012) or the "Church of the Children of Atom" from *Fallout 3* (2008).

The second level of religion is referential: The implicit or explicit reference in the game to an existing religious tradition outside the game, but often only understandable as such by a player who is rather familiar with the tradition at stake. The reference in *Child of Light* to Good Friday and Eastern Sunday is clearly to the Christian liturgical practice and faith, but only when one is raised in such a context.

The third level is reflexive: The reflection within the game on existential notions that are traditionally associated with religion within the game itself. Many games, especially those with elaborate narratives, reflect more or less implicitly on the existential themes of humankind: friendship, love, sacrifice, birth, life, death, sin, salvation, forgiveness, etc. Examples are *Brink* (2011) on

ecological disaster in combination with worldwide refugees, or racism versus polytheism in *Elder's Scroll V: Skyrim* (2011).

The fourth level is ritual: Players who are involved in in-game behavior that is traditionally associated with religion. The most prominent example is that of the so-called "forced baptism" of *Bioshock Infinite* (2013), in which the player has to agree that he/his avatar is "baptized" before proceeding further through the game. For the majority of players this baptism did not present any problems, but for some Christians it certainly did. Being one of the sacrament of both Protestant and Roman Catholic tradition, some Christian gamers thought this was inappropriate (Hermandez, 2013).

The final level of religion in video games is the meta level, where the experience of gaming itself is identified as religious (by scholars and/or the gamers themselves). This level is (primarily) of our concern in this chapter. When we talk about the theophoric quality of video games, we think of the actual playing of the video games as somehow connected to the divine acts of creation, redemption, and consummation, a "level 5" religious phenomenon. We will turn to this level in greater detail when we discuss the christophoric/theophoric quality of video games. But before that we will have to establish a working idea of what theology, as the scholarly context for these notions, actually is.

A THEOLOGY OF CULTURE IN A DIGITAL AGE

The question of what theology actually may be is very paradoxically hard to answer. Although virtually everyone has some sort of idea of what theology is (or might be), defining its core substance, its main object, and its inherent methodology is a perilous task. Arguably, the definition with the largest support in Christian tradition is that Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109): *Fides quaerens intellectum*, "faith seeking understanding." Though classical in its own rights, this definition has lost its self-evidence in postmodern contexts.

MacQuarrie (2003) tries a more academic approach: "Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available" (p. 1). Another modern attempt to give a definition of theology is done by Alister McGrath (2002): "The Christian tradition posits a unitary reality, holding that the entire creation has the potential to bear witness to its creator. To capture the full vision of God

involves an appeal to the entire economy of salvation – creation, redemption, and the hope of final consummation" (p. 3).

Both authors (MacQuarrie and McGrath) offer intriguing details in their definitions as far as the topic of our chapter is concerned. MacQuarrie's definition offers a sharp distinction between theology and religious studies. Religious studies are concerned with research on the phenomenon of "religion" within a descriptive context. Theology on the other hand, researches the notion of "God" within a certain religious tradition, and within a specific normative context. MacQuarrie speaks about "participation in" and "reflection of" a particular faith, which is at the same time the object of scholarly inquiry.

The elements (reflection and participation) are spoken of earlier in this chapter, when we were addressing the five elements of religion in video games, and especially the last three of them. On the third level, the game reflects (and/or encourages the player to do so) on existential notions. And on the fourth level, the player acts symbolically within the game environment, participating in whatever ritual performance the game encourages (or forces) the player to take part in.

When this active ritual-liturgical-religious act is stretched over the game in its fullness, the game itself becomes "religious" in a very specific way. Theologically speaking, the fifth level of religion in video games denotes the game as a religious act in itself, by which the gamer participates in the divine acts of God himself as this is conceptualized in the Christian tradition.

These divine acts are traditionally thought of as the "economy of salvation," the way in which (according to the believer) God has created the universe, saved humankind from certain demise, and promised eternal bliss in heaven for those who are willing to accept Him. McGrath, and other theologians, summarize this "economy" in three divine acts: Creation (associated with God the Father), redemption (associated with God the Son), and consummation of fulfillment (associated with God the Holy Spirit).

Traditionally, the sources of these three divine acts are sacred Scripture (for the believer written under divine inspiration) and in the case of Roman Catholicism, sacred tradition (in which, for the believer again, this sacred scripture has been studied, explained, and applied, and authoritatively passed over from one generation to the other). For the sake of this chapter about the theophoric quality of games, I want to suggest another source of theological knowledge: our culture (Kelton, 2005).

The object of cultural theology is, from the perspective of religious studies, to study modern-day culture (like novels, movies, and video games) in relation to the explicit and (often) implicit traces within this culture, of traditional religious symbols, objects, texts, and notions. These traces are to be identified as such, explicated, analyzed, and critically discussed in relation to the (originating) religious and theological tradition(s).

Theologically, cultural theology explains these traces of the divine godhead in our culture, as "proof" of the existence and perseverance of the Christian God in our times. The universe, because (and only because) it is considered as being created by God (as is the premise of all monotheistic faiths), can be considered as bearing witness of its creator (God the Father) and its savior (Jesus of Nazareth). The *deus absconditus* of our secularized society is thus rethought as a *deus incognitus*: Hidden, only to be recognized by those who still remember Him. Think of the second level of religion in games, the referential level, on which the religious element is only conceivable by those who are educated to see.

THE CONCEPTS OF CHRISTOPHORISM/THEOPHORISM

With the context of this theology of culture, it becomes possible to think about the gamers and games as "theophoric" or "christophoric." To start with the first one, christophorism, Ben Witherington III (2016) states: "Theology and ethics in and of the New Testament are christocentric, christotelic, christophoric, for as the author of the latest New Testament book says, it is the believer's destination to become 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4), or as Paul would put it, 'to be fully conformed to the image of God's Son' (Rom. 8:29)" (p. 1).

According to Kozlovic (2004), in the cultural domain, the Christ-figure can be understood in a smaller sense as a character with traits that directly reflect the teachings and actions of Christ as told and visualized in the Christian tradition, but also, in a much broader sense, as a salvific, messianic figure sacrificing his own life for the benefit of the many.

The idea that the Christian believer is, in some way, bearer of the image of Christ himself, has found its way into the popular myth concerning saint Christopher, or *Christophorus* in Latin/Greek, literally "he who carries Christ." According to Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, Christopher began his life as Reprobus. At one time, he decided he wanted to serve "the greatest king there was." Eventually, he learned that a certain "Jesus Christ" was the one most feared by the scum he encountered.

A hermit advised Reprobus, being very tall and strong, to serve Christ by carrying people on his shoulders across a great river. After some time, a child asked Reprobus to be carried across. During the crossover, the child began to weigh heavier and heavier on Reprobus' shoulders until the point he almost drowned himself. Safe at the other bank, he said to the child: "I do not think the whole world could have been as heavy on my shoulders as you were." The child responded: "You had on your shoulders not only the whole world but Him who made it. I am Christ your king, whom you are serving by this work." The child vanished, and Reprobus—now called Christophorus, "he who carried Christ"—converted to Christianity, eventually dying as a martyr.

The story of this christophoric Reprobus has always been connected to Christian anthropology, which has its biblical foundation in one particular verse: " So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27). The interpretation of this notion is the object of ongoing theological debate, but the heart of the imago Dei doctrine consists of the idea that there is a specific, inalienable connection between God as the creator of all things, and his creation. Man "reflects" or "possesses" certain "traces" of God in himself (Guthrie, 1994, pp. 194–197).

Stephen Garner (1995) suggests that just as God creates men and women, so can men imitate God through creative acts of their own. We are "created co-creator" (Hefner, 1989, 2003), created in the image of our creator, to do what He did, to create. Christophorus is an example of the ideal Christian knowing he is called to carry Christ's image, that is, to be like Christ himself. And the notion of man created as cocreators indicates that video games could be seen as having a certain theophoric quality.

On the first level, video games are theophoric in the sense that there are (as games) the creation of man mimicking its creator (Bosman, 2016b), as is the case with all human creative production. On the second level, however, and that is the one we want to address in this chapter, is the mimicking of God in all three his divine acts—not only creation, but also redemption and consummation—by the gamer in the game.

FOUR THEOLOGICAL CASE STUDIES

In this section, we will amplify the theophoric quality of video games with the help of a deeper theological analysis of the four games mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Godus: Create Like God

Godus is technically still under development by 22Cans, also one of Molyneux's game companies, but has been released in so-called prereleases since 2014. Due to financial difficulties, it is very unlikely that the game will reach its intended full release (Duwell, 2015). In the game *Godus* (2013), the player is asked to assume the role of an almighty creator. The player begins his divine career by saving a primordial man and woman from drowning. With your help, they will travel to some sort of "promised land," where they will build a tent and procreate. By forming the earth and waters, the player can shape the form of the game world and support (or hinder) the advancement of "hi" chosen people. The player, worshipped by his devotees, will improve the situation of his population through time by taking care of their environmental and reproducing skills.

It is hardly a difficult task to see (a more or less) implicit reference to the Christian tradition. According to the book of Genesis, God "created the heaven and the earth" (1:1). The process of creation is a matter of dividing between opposites, *bara* in Hebrew, light from darkness, day from night, heaven from earth, etcetera (van Wolde, 2016). This is exactly what the gamer is doing in *Godus*: By manipulating land and water, the player creates an environment in which the nonplayable characters (NPCs) can progress.

The whole theme of manipulating water into land so the faithful, the player's "people" who inhabit the game world, can safely cross to the other site, is a small toss away from the well-known story from the book of Exodus. In Exodus, God (through Moses) splits the Red Sea in order to let the Israelites cross safely, fleeing from oppression in Egypt (Exodus 13:17–14:29). In Hebrew and Christian tradition, this is one of the decisive moments in the relation between God and Israel, where JHWH is considered by Israel as "their" God, and themselves as His "chosen people" (Garr, 2014).

Of course, some serious theological considerations and objections could (and should) be given to the "theology of *Godus*" (Bosman, 2016b), among which the dependency of the player-as-creator on the devotion of his people vis-à-vis the absolute freedom thought to be one of God's main characteristics in monotheist tradition (Wierenga, 1989), and to the nature of the player/creator being more of a demiurge than of the monotheistic God (O'Brien, 2015).

Nevertheless, despite these interesting objections, the theophoric quality *Godus* (and the other games in the so-called "god genre") is bluntly apparent. Just as God, according to Genesis, creates the universe by separating

water and earth to make it an inhabitable place for man and female, both created in his image; so the player of *Godus* separates land and water in order to arrange the game world as a place for "his" people to live and to thrive on. By playing *Godus*, the gamer mimics the divine act of creation: He answers the call to which he was brought into this world, to cocreate. In his creational act, the gamer is figurally carrying the image of God, in two different ways: In the fact that he is alive, and in the act of creative play. The *Godus'* player is therefore to be qualified as theophoric.

Child of Light: Descend Into the Underworld

Child of Light (Ubisoft, 2014) features a very interesting story. Aurora, the daughter of an anonymous duke and a mysteriously absent duchess, contracts some sort of physical illness, which causes her death within one night. The game narrator tells the gamer: "It was the Great Friday before Easter, 1895…" Aurora awakes in a mysterious subterranean land called Lemuria, in which the inhabitants are forced to do wicked things by the dark queen Umbra (Latin for "shadow"). Eventually, Umbra manages to kill Aurora. Then, Aurora is "resurrected" (the game actually uses this term) by her mother, the Queen of Light. Aurora travels back to Umbra's castle, defeats her, and frees Lemuria and all its inhabitants from her dark rule.

On Easter Sunday (again, the game uses this exact words), the day of Aurora's arrival in the real word, the residents of her homeland are about to be drowned by the rising flood, caused by a massive earthquake. Aurora, with the help of her Lemurian companions, manages to rescue her people by leading them through the magic mirror to the now peaceful Lemuria. In the closing scenes, only a small island in a lake remains, but Lemuria begins to grow again.

Aurora is a christophoric character in her own right and for a couple of reasons (Bosman, 2016c). The primary argument is the narratological timeframe of the game, taking place between Great Friday and Easter Sunday. In Christian tradition, this period is known as the "holy week," in which the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ is commemorated (Farwell, 2005). With little scriptural basis, Christian tradition has developed the notion of the "harrowing of hell" (Laufer, 2013): Christ himself descended into the underworld to free those who had lived before His coming from eternal oblivion (Latin: *descensus christi ad inferros*; in English also known as Harrowing of Hell). Aurora's story is mimicking this "holy timeframe."

Other additional arguments for the christophoric nature of Aurora can be found throughout the game. Three times in the game, when Aurora is presented with a divine gift, she hovers over the ground, turning herself to the player. Aurora holds her head slightly lifted to the sky, eyes closed, holding her arms stretched horizontally, a pose traditionally associated with the figure of Christ on the cross. Aurora's name derives from the Roman goddess of the dawn meaning "morning star," in Christian tradition associated with Christ himself as the "new dawn of mankind" (Jensen, 2000, pp. 12–13). On two different occasions, Aurora speaks of her own mission as "rescuing my people," a reference to the Old Testament notion of God's chosen people (see above). And last but not least, both the earthquake and the flood of *Child of Light* occur in the New Testament linked in both cases to Christ's "second coming" (Matthew 24:38–39; 27:54; Luke 21:1–11).

It is plausible to qualify Aurora as a christophoric game character (the referential level), for she mirrors the *descensus christi ad inferros* from Christian tradition. But the same could be said about the gamer playing the game and assuming the role of Aurora, and through Aurora, of Christ himself (the meta level). *Child of Light* has a theophoric quality, because it places the gamer in a position in which he (by his actions) mimics the divine act itself. On the level of the video game, Aurora (and thus the gamer) descends into the underworld to liberate those who are imprisoned there. The gamer amplifies the unique *descensus* of Christ, but at the same time actualizes this harrowing of hell.

Metro Last Light: Forgive Your Enemy

The same christophoric/theophoric quality can also be found in three other games, the first of which is *Metro Last Light*. In this game, developed by Ukraine studio 4A Games and published in 2013, the world has suffered a worldwide nuclear war. The game takes place in Moscow, where the few survivors of the nuclear holocaust have retreated within the relative safety of the metro stations and tunnels. The surface of Moscow is heavily irradiated; humans have to wear breathing equipment, and it is swarmed with mutant flora and fauna.

4A Games released a special trailer, which they called "the Genesis trailer." In this trailer, an English voice (with a thick Russian accent) narrates the opening chapter of Genesis. The narrated beauty of God's original creation—"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Genesis 1:31)—is visually contrasted with the ugliness of present-day reality. When

the narrator arrives at the seventh day, he derives from the classical Genesis text. Instead of telling that God rested on the seventh day, resting from all the work He had done (Genesis 2:2–3), the narrator says: "And on the seventh day, they say, God rested. But God didn't rest. God left. Or – perhaps – died. Judgment Day came and He abandoned us, casting humanity aside like parasites."

This trailer is a narratologically stunning, recapturing of what is known in the Western world since the 1960s as the "God is dead"-theology. Linked to Nietzsche's expression "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!" (*The Happy Science*, 1882), fused by growing secularism in the Western world and amplified by the collective horror of the German concentration camps vis-à-vis God's promise to His chosen people, resulted into a widespread idea that God was "dead" (McGrath, 1997, pp. 254–256). This was not regarded, even by its heralds, as a success of human evolution per se, but was (and is) always mixed with feelings of regret and loneliness. The horrors of the post-apocalyptic world of *Last Light* are a perfect example of the human experience that God could not possibly live in this reality, and still not intervene. If God "allows" these monstrosities, then there is no God at all.

In this "god-less" environment, in this world-without-God, the gamer takes the role of the metro survivor Artyom, who is tasked to prevent civil war between the underground fractions and to get rid of the mutated monsters which haunt the metro tunnels once and for all. On three-quarters of the game narrative, Artyom visits the Cathedral of the Mother of God, located in the heart of Moscow. The player has to take extreme notice to recognize this Russian landmark. There are no visible traces of its original sacred purpose: No relics, no icons, no statues, no altars, nothing at all. Even in the Moscow cathedral, God seems to be dead indeed.

Somewhere in the Moscow cathedral, Artoym finds his archenemy Pavl. Pavl lies incapacitated against a closet, his breathing mask still on but without a filter. Artyom (thus the player) can make a fundamental choice: Saving or killing Pavl. When Artoym chooses to save Pavl, Artyom's traveling partner comments: "So this is forgiveness. I will remember." Above the closet Pavl leans to, a painting can be observed. When observed closely, the painting reveals to be the arch icon of Russian orthodoxy: The mandyllion, also known as the "image of Edessa." It is the only explicit reference to material religion in the whole game.

The theology of this scene is gripping. When Artyom, that is, the player, chooses to save his worst enemy, an image of Christ appears. When forgiving your worst enemy, the player becomes an image of Christ himself.

Forgiving each other is one of the most important commandments from the New Testament (for example: Matthew 6:14, 7:2, 18:35; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:37; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13).

When the gamer chooses to save Pavl, to forgive his sins against Artyom and the rest of the world, the gamer himself becomes (in a certain way) God himself. In his act of forgiveness, the gamer manifests God's presence in this world, even though it was thought of as a reality in which God had no place anymore. The player is a christophoric figure, presenting God's own forgiving image to mankind. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Hebrews 8:12). God is not dead, the game seems to narrate theologically, as long as people forgive each other, thus mirroring Christ himself, of whom is written to have said to his executioners, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34).

Mass Effect: Another Shepard

This christophoric behavior is not unique to *Metro Last Light*, it can be found in numerous other games, usually connected to the myth of self-sacrificial hero (Hyles, 2015). Although the myth of the sacrificial hero is not Christian in its core or subject matter, some theophoric games do make this combination, like the *Mass Effect* trilogy (Irizarry & Irizarry, 2014). The story of trilogy (Bioware, 2007–2012) takes place in our near future, in which humankind has gained interstellar space travel. The Milky Way is swarmed with intelligent life forms, among which humankind has to find its own place. Lurking in the background is a vague galactic threat, in the form of a technologically highly advanced artificial species, which periodically wipes the Milky Way of intelligent life.

The interstellar robots are called "reapers," which is the first of many references to Christian tradition to the four apocalyptic horsemen from the book of Revelation (O'Hear & O'Hear, 2015, pp. 70–92). Many more will follow. The first reference appears right at the start of the first game, when commander Sheppard is introduced as the captain of the spaceship Normandy. During the approximately 100 h gaming time across three interconnected titles, the player will control this Shepard. When taken separately, these references appear minor or even trivial, but, when combined, a pattern with heavy narratological impact can be found.

The name of the game protagonist is a reference to the shepherd metaphors from the New Testament (for example: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep," John 10:11), by

which the Christian tradition uses "the good shepherd" as a title for Christ himself (Cachia, 1997). The first extraterrestrial colony of humankind is called "Eden Prime," a reference to the mythical Garden of Eden from Genesis 2 and 3. The name of an interstellar commercially run prison for highly dangerous criminals is called "Purgatory," a reference to the intermediate state after physical death in which (according to Roman Catholic tradition) the souls of the unworthy are cleansed before they can enter heaven (Walls, 2015).

When Shepard dies in an accident at the beginning of the second installment, an interstellar crime syndicate revives her broken body back to life. The name of this project is "Lazarus," a reference to the story form the gospel of John (Chapter 11) in which a dead man is brought back to life by Jesus Christ. When Shepard meets the only fertile female of an alien race on the brink of extinction, she calls herself "Eve," a reference to the Biblical Eve from the book of Genesis. And when Shepard meets a *Gesammtgestalt* of a collective, artificial race (the Geth) and calls for his name, the computer of the Normandy ship replies: "Legion, for we are with many." The Geth, now dubbed Legion, is happy with this reference and even quotes the Biblical finding place, Marcus 5:19.

The last reference is given when Shepard finely sacrificed his or her own life to save the civilizations of the Milky Way from another wave of periodical extinction by the Reapers. On a planet with three moons, an indefinable time period later, a grandfather and his granddaughter (or grandson) are staring to the stars. The child asks "Did that all really happen?," probably as a reply to what the old man has told so far, which is (very likely) the story the player just finished, the story of Shepard. Eventually, the child asks one last question: "Tell me another story about *the* shepherd." The name Shepard has now lost its value as a name, and has become a title itself. Shepard becomes shepherd, man becomes God.

It is not hard to see the christophoric quality of the *Mass Effect* trilogy. The player assumes, quite implicitly at first, the role of a (the) divine savior which is destined (but still free) to save all living, intelligent life from total annihilation by the hands of an apocalyptic force. By choosing to sacrifice the protagonist, that is the player, redemption can be found and given. In this choice, the player fits himself into the framework of the Christian redemption narrative, acting *as if* he was the Savior himself. The player can become, when understanding the game narrative and acting upon it, quite literally Christ himself, another divine shepherd, bringing peace to the universe.

CLOSING STATEMENT

In this chapter, I argued that video games do not only make references (on material, referential, or reflexive levels) to (existing or fantasy) religious traditions, but also invite the game player, through the playing of the game, to participate in the divine acts of creation, redemption, and consummation (as seen in the Christian tradition). The first part of this assertion can be argued from the external position of the scholar of religion. The second part, however, can only be made theologically, that is, on the condition of the acceptance of the existence of God.

Theologically, the player confirms, duplicates, adds, attributes, elaborates, and amplifies the divine acts of creation, redemption, and consummation in as much as he actualizes these acts in his gaming performance. By this actualization, the gamer (and the game) becomes theophoric (christophoric), that is, bearer of the face of God in this world. This is more than a remembrance, more than a re-enactment, although these elements are not absent. The theophoric quality of some video games suggests (theologically) that the gamer himself becomes "divine," although in a derivative way.

Some gaming, seen in such a way, can therefore be described as a religious act in itself, as Wagner has already suggested. Wagner however only took the step to suggest that "gaming" and "believing" or "game" and "religion" share common traits, in the sense that (being in) religion is like (playing) a game. The next step is exactly the other way around: Playing (some) games means being religious, in the (derivate) executing of the divine acts of God himself.

In the future, some more research might be done on the theophoric quality of video games within other (non-Christian) religious traditions. As this chapter focused itself on the Christian tradition, there are multiple games to be named which utilize other traditions, like the aforementioned *Prince of Persia* (2008) in the context of Zoroastrianism, the *Final Fantasy* series (1987–2015) in the context of Taoism and Confucianism, and *Smite* (2014) to Hinduism.

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